Chapter 8.14
Learning for the Future:
Emerging Technologies and Social Participation

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ABSTRACT

Over the last five years there has been a large scale shift in popular engagement with new media. Virtual worlds and massive multiplayer online games attract increasing numbers, whilst social networking sites have become commonplace. The changing nature of online engagement privileges interaction over information. Web 2.0 applications promote new kinds of interactivity, giving prominence and prestige to new literacies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). To date, discussion of the opportunities, and indeed the risks presented by Web 2.0 has been largely confined to social and recreational worlds. The purpose of this chapter is to open up discussion about the relevance of Web 2.0 to educational practice. A central concern in what follows will be to show how the new ways of communicating and collaborating that constitute digital literacy might combine with new insights into learning in ways that transform how we conceive of education (Gee, 2004).

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INTRODUCTION

The term Web 2.0 was originally coined by O'Reilly (2005) as a way of referring to a significant shift in the ways in which software applications were developing and the ways in which users were adopting and adapting these applications. New applications were tending to become easier for the non-expert to use and more interactive, thus widening the scope for participation in online communities - it was becoming possible for those with relatively unsophisticated technical skills to create and share content over the internet. The popularity of blogs as a medium for individuals and groups to publish and discuss their concerns, news, and interests (whether frivolous or serious) is testimony to the popularity and everyday currency of the Web 2.0 phenomenon (Davies and Merchant, 2007; Carrington, 2008). And so, the increased availability of broadband, together with the development of more responsive and user-friendly software has led to a greater recognition of the internet as a place for social interaction, a place for collaboration, and a place for strengthening and building social networks. Web 2.0 commentators have drawn our

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attention to the 'social' and 'participatory' nature of contemporary life online (Lessig, 2004) whereas innovators and early-adopters are just beginning to glimpse the educational possibilities of these new development.

Not only do educators need to understand and capitalize on these new ways of being and interacting, they also need to investigate the educational potential of social networking. In order to do this, there is a pressing need to conceptualize the difference between casual and frivolous online interaction and those kinds of communication that have the characteristics of 'learning conversations'. Whilst there has been considerable development in our knowledge about the characteristics of learning conversations in face-to-face interaction in classrooms (Mercer, 2005; Alexander, 2007) there is little equivalent work in the field of online social networking.

Can these new spaces for shared communication provide an arena for the more systematic and structured interactions that are associated with formal education? This chapter addresses this question by both drawing both on the literature and my own research and writing, highlighting how new kinds of software not only involve new literacies but also changing roles for teachers and learners. Most of the material is drawn from classroom studies with children in the 7-11 age range and includes email partnerships, literacy work in virtual worlds, educational blogging and wiki building.

TECHNOLOGY AND LITERACY

Children and young people are growing up in a rapidly changing social world - a social world that is marked by the spread of new digital technologies. The impact of these technologies on the toy and game industry, on mass entertainment and communication, and on the ways in which many of us live and work has been little short of transformative. In schools, despite a substantial investment in computer hardware and software, there is still unevenness of provision and access, and considerable professional uncertainty about how to integrate new technologies into the curriculum and how to develop appropriate pedagogies. Nowhere is this uncertainty more keenly felt than in the area of literacy. Literacy educators, it has been suggested, need to assess the significance of new communication technologies and the ways of producing, distributing and responding to messages that typify them (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). This involves looking at new genres, emerging conventions of communication and the changes in language associated with them. In doing this, literacy educators will inevitably have to negotiate the tension between notions of correctness and the realities of linguistic change, as well as a whole host of other issues that emerge with the growth of peer-to-peer communication and digitally-mediated social networks. It is against a backdrop of rapid social change and professional uncertainty that the work on digital literacy and new communications technology described in this chapter is placed. The work focuses primarily on digital writing, but partly because of the multimodal nature of this communication, there is an inevitable overlap with the wider area of new media studies.

New trends in digital culture, collectively referred to as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), have begun to emerge over the last few years. These have ushered in new kinds of social participation through user-generated content, exchange and playful interaction. Of particular note here are individual and group blogs; sites which are designed for collaborative authorship (such as wikis); sites for generating and exchanging media such as music, still and moving image; and 3D virtual worlds. These networking sites provide a context for affinity, and facilitate the development of ad hoc purpose- or interest-driven groups in which self-directed, informal learning can take place. They not only offer us alternative models for envisioning learning communities but also

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